

Postscripts by Jack Post

Clark's Island in March can be cold, with the easterly wind blowing across Duxbury Bay, the trees stark under gray skies, and the ever-present seagulls screaming disapproval of foreign invasion of their aerie. Coasting in toward the beach, on the lookout for rocks, we leaped overboard onto the shale in rubber boots, not barefoot into that 40 degree water. We anchored the whaler just far enough out so that she would not ground on the ebbing tide, then unloaded the plywood and tools.

We headed straight for the barn, for that was where we would find the president, and we had come to bring him home. The president? Not the one currently in Washington, nor yet the one of Harvard who had left Cambridge to visit Mr. Roosevelt in the capitol of Teddy's time; no this was President Nielson of Smith College, once painted long ago on Clark's Island by an artist companion of Sarah Wingate Taylor, whose class now wanted to donate this portrait to their college as a memorial, accompanied of course by a suitable anniversary offering. So here we were, trudging out to the old barn, sidestepping the hundreds of rabbit holes and trespassing on the nesting area of the outraged gulls.

No one lives on the island in winter, nor have for many a year. When each family cut their own cordwood, grew and put up their own vegetables, smoked their own meat and dried their quintals of cod, then the island with its turnip fields, its deep well, its stands of timber, its proliferation of fish and wildfowl, afforded a living equal to the mainland of the old colony, more lonely perhaps, but perfectly possible. After the amenities of life became necessities, after electricity and gas, and, most of all modern plumbing were considered as requisite, then Clark's Island, unimproved and left behind by the times, no longer attracted the descendants of the Watson clan, at least not through the chill months of winter, when ice might isolate islanders for days or perhaps weeks at a time. If people did not have to live that way any more, why should they?

We forced the squeaky barn padlock and threw wide the big doors, letting the sunlight stream into the musty interior. The one-lung tractor with the cutter bar for clearing the island paths stood hibernating under its skein of spiderwebs, a broken rake and a shovel or two canted against the near wall beside it. Against the face of the hayloft, a stubby mast and thick boom, lashed loosely together around the stiff canvas of an ancient sail waited to be stepped in a lugger which must have long ago foundered on some sand bank.

Up the creaky stairs to the loft we could see the picture hanging in the dim recesses of the far wall. We picked our way through the clutter of broken bedsteads and chipped commodes, and lifted the president down from his nail. Surprisingly, he seemed in good shape after all his years of exile, impressive even under the layers of dirt, in his academic cap and gown. We transported him carefully down the stairs, one on each end, for he stood full size; then dusted him off in the sunshine of the barn entrance. Resplendent over the fireplace in some Common Room, he would surely do credit to his alma mater.

Right now, our job was to crate him for the return voyage across Duxbury Bay, and for this we had brought two sheets of plywood, which we cut to size and then roped together with a length of lobster line. Inside the protection, he was swathed with a double layer of polyethylene sheeting which would effectively keep off any spray which we might take aboard. We hauled in the boat until it grounded, then marched our crate out over the pebbles and slid it carefully onto the foredeck. There it should ride well, wedged tightly between the bow rail and the little deckhouse. Gathering up the tools and scraps of plywood, we heaved them aboard and flopped over the gunwale ourselves, giving a last shove to ease the boat toward deep water.

Out in the bay, a great flock of eiders, rafting over toward High Pines from Clark's Island, took off as our whaler gathered speed, the brilliant black and white of the drakes glittering at the rapid wing beats in contrast to the more sombre plumage of the females. Halfway towards Powder Point, strung out almost to the bridge, a line of geese, the near ones first, began to beat their way out of the water, their wing span so great that they seemed to be moving slowly, although we, following at top speed, gradually were dropping behind in the race.

As we entered the basin and began to slow for our landing, the sky seemed full of geese that within a week all have headed north for the breeding grounds. We beached our craft and carried our precious crate up to the station wagon. Mission completed.